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ABSTRACT

Education, either face-to-face or across distances, is about creating a shared way of thinking about ourselves and our world. Education is not just preparation for life; it is a way of life. Exchanging ideas with students and teachers in other places about science, math, literature, ideas, and beliefs enhances learning because education is inherently a social process which constructs shared understandings. The AT&T Learning Network provides a structure (Learning Circles) and a process (teamwork over time and distance) for creating a shared way of understanding. This paper describes the process of forming learning circles. Approximately eight geographically diverse classrooms with a common educational focus are joined together through a subscription to the AT&T Learning Network. Learning circles enable students from different cultures, regions, religions, ages, perspectives, and with a range of physical and mental strengths to work together in a medium that treats diversity as a resource. The activity encourages students to think of creative ways to show or illustrate who they are and how their social and physical world is similar and different from that of their distant partners. (CCM)

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Learning Circles: Virtual Communities for Elementary and Secondary Schools

by Margaret Riel

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Learning Circles: Virtual Communities for Elementary and Secondary Schools

Margaret Riel

Education, either face-to-face or across distances, is about creating a shared way of thinking about ourselves and our world. Education is not just preparation for life, it is a way of life. Exchanging ideas with students and teachers in other places about science, math, literature, ideas, and beliefs enhance learning because it is inherently a social process of constructing shared understandings. The AT&T Learning Network provides a structure -- Learning Circles--and process --team work over time and distance--for creating a shared way of understanding.

Learning Circles are virtual communities that have no fixed locations or time zones. In part a Learning Circle is group conversation carried over electronic mail in slow motion. But what happens online is only half the story. The other half is what takes place in the classroom as a direct result of either the sending or receiving of information. The virtual and real classrooms are inseparable.

1) Forming the Learning Circle.

Approximately 8 geographically diverse classrooms with a common educational focus are joined together through a subscription to the AT&T Learning Network. The AT&T Learning Network matches teachers and students in small, geographically diverse, working groups to accomplish shared educational goals. Teachers select a particular type of Learning Circle (Computer Chronicles, Mind Works, Places and Perspectives, Society's Problems, Global Issues or Energy & the Environment) at either the elementary, middle and high school level.

The participants in a Learning Circle work together on a set of projects which they summarize for their Circle publication, a booklet or newspaper. Learning Circles enable students from different cultures, regions, religions, ages, perspectives, and with a range of physical and mental strengths to work together in a medium that treats diversity as a resource. During the introductory phase students provide a profile of themselves, their school and their community for their partners. These descriptions like this one from Alaska give life to our diverse social arrangements.

> Sheldon Point School (Alaska) has 5 classrooms, with a total of 45 students in grades 1-12, most of whom are Yupik Eskimos. We live in a small village of less than 300 people on an area of about one square mile isolated from other locations by the rugged terrain. We drive snowmobiles to school. The school is the chief source of jobs in the community and families hunt, trap, and fish.

The students also send "Welcome Packs" through the postal mail. This activity encourages students to think of creative ways to show or illustrate who they are and how their social and physical world is similar and different from that of their distant partners. Students send photos, maps, train schedules, candy wrappers, taped messages and music, postcards, coins, homework examples, and many unusual (small) items that tell about themselves and their community. In the following message a teacher describes her students working with Welcome Pack materials.

~~~~~~

From: !jamesvny002 (Lois Kaczor)
To: !ppe1:cir
Subject: Classroom update

Dear Circle Mates,

...Picture, please, a group of ten fourth graders spread about the Library floor with bits and pieces of the Welcome Pack from British Columbia. Each is deeply engrossed in reading the brochures, maps, clippings, etc. There is considerable verbal exchange as they call out pieces of information they find interesting. There is some arguing over who gets what next.
There are two boys now pulling out the globe to do a comparison of the
~~~~~~

location of British Columbia and Syracuse and there is considerable discussion about the weather differences.

Two other youngsters get out an atlas, check a map, put the atlas away and get a "better" one. A girl carries a clipboard and is writing down questions. These are to be used in the next Learning Network message. Two teachers move in and about this scene answering questions, or making suggestions for further analysis. This goes on for thirty minutes and must end only because another group wishes to use the floor space. Grudgingly, things are put away, but the conversation continues.
"Why..."
"What about ..."
"Did you see..."
"Well, I think ..."
The Welcome Pack is clutched securely in the hands of one student and the slightly noisy group exits the library on its way to the reading room. These deeply involved, actively engaged, turned on, task-oriented learners are a group of "reluctant readers" who normally have far more interesting things to do with their time than to attend to their studies. But when they are with their reading teacher, who volunteered them to work with the AT&T Learning Network, they are the best workers and thinkers I've seen in a long time. They are writing, they are reading, they are asking questions, they are learning and they are enjoying it!

That's it for today ...
Lois in overcast Syracuse.

And finally this comment from Sharon Kubenka, Ingram School, Texas shows how the introductory activities can become the basis of classroom lessons.

> As the surveys arrived, we learned how to make charts and graphs, discuss difference of opinion and manipulate data mathematically with 'what if...' statements. With the Welcome Packs from Canada and Saudi Arabia, we learned metric conversions and money exchange rates. Looking at the location of all our partners, we had a meaningful lesson on time zones.

2) Planning the Learning Circle projects.

The curriculum guide, on-line messages and a circle coordinator help the teachers and students move from the introductory phase to planning a learning task for the Circle. Each class sponsors one activity in the Learning Circle that is (ideally) drawn from the classroom curriculum. Teachers and students work together to assemble these ideas into a set of group projects for the Learning Circle. This cooperative definition of the group task helps assure curriculum relevance and creates a strong sense of group ownership over the work.

One of the best ways to learn something is to teach it to someone else. Learning Circle activities capitalize on this educational principle. The participants in the Learning Circle are teachers as well as learners. As teachers, each class organizes an educational activity for the rest of the learners on the network. As learners, they participate in the activities organized by other classes. Here are some examples of activities that have taken place over the network:

> Students in one class sponsored a project which sought information about the founding of their communities. Students in Australia shared stories of the discovery of opal mines that led to the settling of Coober Pedy where people live underground to escape the severe weather of the desert. Students in New York described how the early trading center at the junction of two railroad lines developed into a thriving business center and finally into a suburb of a larger city. From Canada came stories of native people trading sea otter furs with the British for blankets and tools, as well as stories about settlements established by the Loyalists fleeing from the New America.
>
> Sandi Norgaard, in Hilton, New York, challenged the elementary schools students in their circle to take over their local bureau of tourism by producing travel brochures for their area. "Welcome to Denmark...the land of the Vikings" or "Come to Israel" begin the guides. Another set of guides created by a Circle of secondary students are called "Travel Brochures for Teens" and provide a look at their cities from the perspective of teenagers. A teacher Carrie Bower, from New York, extended this idea to make different time periods more vivid by having students create travel brochures from their area in a

different historical period. One brochure invites tourists to the land of the Aztecs: "Journey to the secret places, enjoy the sunny days and cool evenings."

Bill Burrall in Moundsville Virginia thought of a different way for students to use their community as a resource for learning about social problems in his Learning Circle. His class invited inmates from the nearby State Penitentiary to be online guests in their Society's Problems Learning Circle. The inmates provide a very different source of information about gang violence, drugs, abuse, and responsible decision making. This project highlights the ability of creative teachers to find new ways to use the technology to accomplish their educational objectives.

Here are examples of Learning Circle Projects from each of three Circles, one at each level. Each of the projects was sponsored by one of the participating classrooms:

Elementary School Level "Places and Perspectives"	Middle School Level "Society's Problems"	High School Level "Global Issues"
Price Comparisons	Pollution Experiment	Democracy and Education
City Guides--Historical	Gangs-Survey & Opin.	Global Economy & Recession
Local history timeline	Homeless Children	Ozone and the Environment
World War II interviews	AIDS	Solar Power
Weather Reporting	Teenage Pregnancy	Racial Hatred Local
endangered species	Drunk Driving	Health Problems

The project approach to exploring and solving real problems that characterizes Learning Circle activities encourages the integration of different subjects helping to place knowledge and skill in the context of their use in the adult community.

3) Exchanging work on the projects.

Students work closely with students in their classroom as well as the students in distant locations to complete the Learning Circle projects. Students are motivated to work hard on these projects as they want to help their peers be successful. They also know that their work will be read by others. The mutual inter-dependence of teamwork is an effective way to motivate student work. Project requests are completed by small groups of students collecting information from their classmates or community and then they collectively write a summary of what they discover. Here is a message that was sent by a teacher as the responses were being exchanged in her Learning Circle.

~~~~~~

Date: Thu Nov 19 22:19:00 EST 1992
From: !johnwInva001 (Marilyn Wall at John Wayland)
Subject: Great responses
To: !ppe3:cir

W O W ! WHAT WONDERFUL RESPONSES EVERYONE IS SENDING!

We sure have one fantastic circle!

I can't believe that I made it. It is 8:30 Thursday night. I can actually just sit here in front of my computer and just "talk!" I am so proud of my class. Fourth grade is such a neat grade. Learning is so exciting to them. They have heart!!!! How lucky I am to work with kids like this!

Barbara [NJ]...my kids have had fun with the cost of living. Their little eyes popped open when they saw the cost of housing Candy's class [CA] sent in. They also noticed that the general cost of living in Dodie's class [MI] was generally much higher. A big thanks to your response to our artifact project. We will share our found artifacts with you.

Rhoda [NY], we hope your class will enjoy our Indian history. When the class first began their Indian project, they thought all Indians lived in tepees. They have come a long way.
~~~~~~

Dodie [MI], your assembly sounded so great! I think we might steal your idea and do something similar. You also might video tape your kids doing different activities. It's good to have on file to show others. The kids are keying in their response to your recycling project. It might be interesting to compare the response from a rural school as opposed to an urban school in NJ or Mich.

Candy [CA], my kids really have enjoyed interviewing new arrivals to this country. I used two great books to introduce your project. One is a book put out by Scholastic called Immigrants. The other is a new magazine called "Faces." Faces is published by the same people who put out Cobblestone. It deals with other people's culture and the APRIL92 issue dealt with your topic. I hope my kids finish typing their essays tomorrow.

Let me know how (and when) you are planning to publish your section. I will try to keep us on schedule so we get the publication out in time for Christmas break.

Burning the midnight oil....
Marilyn Wall, Circle Coordinator
JWE, Bridgewater, Va

4) Creating the publication- the group task.

The task of each Learning Circle is to summarize the work that has taken place in a final publication. The sponsors of a project are responsible for evaluating the work on their project, editing it, and summarizing it. The collection of summaries is an impressive and comprehensive documentation of the teamwork that took place in the Learning Circle.

Teachers often report on the writing interest and skill shown by students during this period of time. The most common observation is the change in the role of the teacher. The students are now asking each other and the teacher for help with their work rather than the teacher telling students to review or revise the work. Ron Oastler, Lord Strathcona Public School, Ontario, Canada describes student work on their Circle publication.

> The project also provided a vehicle for practicing thinking skills. Students compared the characteristics of the different schools and communities within their group by looking for similarities and differences and analyzed their findings. This resulted in a great deal of research as well as discussion. Through the messages the students learned to distinguish facts from opinions and become alert for signs of bias and prejudice in their work and the writing of others.

Compare this with comments made by Denese Wierzbicki of the Alternative Transitional Center in Gillette, Wyoming.

> I work with high risk students and high school dropouts. For the first time in five years I actually had students doing reports without complaints. They took a lot of care with their grammar and tried very hard to make the content look like a real report. They said things like 'students in other schools will be reading or using this information so we need to get it right.'

5) Evaluating the Process.

Learning Circles encourage students to take responsibility for their learning. During the last phase students and teachers look back on what they have accomplished. Over time the teachers and students develop a world-wide network of friends and colleagues.

The Learning Network is sometimes used with gifted students who are able to take on more responsibility for their learning. But the AT&T Learning Network is also an effective way of helping students who may not be interested in more traditional approaches to schooling. The following comments from two teachers of "at risk" students on the Learning Network may help to explain why the collaboration is an effective way to reach some students who are not currently succeeding in schools.

> ...I expected it would improve their geography and writing skills as well as their awareness of the

similarities of people all over our planet and it did. What never entered my mind was the change in my student's behavior when communicating with their Learning Circle. My kids didn't want the other students to know they lived in Juvenile Hall! They wanted to be normal. Usually these kids have a false bravado and brag about their criminal aspirations. It was so unusual for them to deny this. I was fascinated. The attitude prevailed all year with few exceptions and they actually presented real goals to the students from other classes.
Ruth Mikkelsen
Principal
H.P. B. Carden Court School
Marysville, CA

Hi Circle Teachers,
...So far all the discussion has been in the intellectual area of learning. Another benefit I see for both the students and teachers is in interpersonal skills and emotional support. One of the biggest problems we have in our district is the inability of students to get along with teachers, hence a 25% drop-out rate.

As I talk with students at the Alternative Transition Center their most frequent complaint is not that the teacher isn't knowledgeable, but rather that they feel isolated, see no relevance between subjects or between a subject and real life. I see being in contact with other students through telecommunications as offering one way to reach some of these students. They are working on problems that are (or at least appear to be) real to their peers that validates the problem for them. They learn to communicate with people in their school and community as they look for information and answers.

My students have made a real effort to use correct grammar etc. so as not to appear "dummies" to the other schools in the circle. Right now and probably for some time yet telecommunications is so rare in our district that it gives these kids something they are "better at than anyone else," which at this time in their lives they really need.

Denese Wierzbicki
High School Teacher
Alternative Transitional Center
Gillette, Wy

In both these examples, the teachers comment on how their students used the invisibility of the network to help them "pass" as regular students. The asynchronous communication pattern on the network extends work over time so that a response carries only minimum clues about the amount of social support required by these who send it. This makes it possible for students of different abilities to work side-by-side without the students in the other groups knowing about their disabilities or abilities.

Another common thread in both messages was the positive effect on the students' sense of self. In the following message a teacher describes the effect of Circle collaboration on the behavior of one student whose background characteristics match those of students in inner city schools:

...Let me tell you about one student in particular. He is kind of a street-wise kid who comes from a broken home. His father is an alcoholic who does not have any control over his problem. Basically he's a bum. Well, this boy got excited about the network last spring when we did the Computer Chronicles Learning Circle. He ended up being the student editor and artist.

The experience turned him around. He stays after school just to do good things. His teachers this year are all pleasantly surprised as they had expected a terror. He is getting good grades, hanging out with a good group of kids, and generally being a young gentleman. He now helps me do our school paper as he has become quite proficient with PageMaker, MacPaint, and Microsoft Works. ...
So long...
(names withheld to protect the student)

Teachers who participate in the construction of Learning Circles find a high return on invested time, not only in terms of student learning but in their own learning as well. Students, who witness teacher excitement over learning with others, are much more likely to realize the power and value of education. Telecomputing is helping to create a foundation for a global community drawing information from many distant parts of the world into the electronically open classroom walls.

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Conclusion

Learning Circles are virtual communities which provide increased diversity and global perspectives in the construction of common understanding. Learning Circles encourage interdisciplinary study across the curriculum with thematic organization. Teachers and students on the Learning Network develop personal, social, and intellectual skills in a context that has meaning for them. Students in programs that label them as academically unsuccessful work side-by-side with children from gifted programs. Home school students and students from very small schools work with students from large urban centers. Students of native origin work with those who are recent immigrants. In these contrasts and many more, students develop a sense of voice. They want their ideas heard. They want to understand and be understood. This is the educational process.

Teachers use this virtual space to collaborate with other educators without leaving the classroom. The partnership in Learning Circles encourages the diffusion of creative ideas, provides support and direction for difficult challenges, and creates a vehicle for cooperative plans to renew our schools.

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Beginning in September of 1995, Learning Circles will be available to participants on the International Education and Resource Network (I*EARN).

For more information contact:

iearn@copenfund.igc.apc.org

or write

I*EARN International Secretariat
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Yorktown Heights, New York 10598

Here are other guidelines to educational network projects.